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ABSTRACT

A major topic of interest for teachers participating in a graduate course in reading and computers was the application of word processing to facilitate reading and writing instruction. The course strategy for learning about computers and reading and writing instruction involved identifying helpful articles for theoretical background and practical suggestions, then trying out that knowledge with some learners. The articles the class identified as being most helpful seemed to do one of three things: (1) help the class understand why the reading/writing approach or language experience approach (LEA) should be part of the instructional program, (2) persuade the class that such an approach could be accomplished, or (3) show the class how to go about implementing the approach. The teachers' enthusiasm generated by reading the articles was increased by attempting the word processing/LEA with students. The process, which was highly motivational for both teachers and students, begins with children dictating stories as the teacher enters them on the computer, then gradually allowing students to write the stories themselves. The consensus of the class was that if a microcomputer is available to teachers of reading or writing, word processing is a necessity. (HTH)

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The Word Processing Approach to Language Experience

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Having recently taught a graduate course in reading and computers, I have had the opportunity to learn from some classroom teachers the questions they have about using the computer to teach reading. A major topic of interest for these teachers was the application of word processing to facilitate reading and writing instruction. This interest seemed to grow out of a desire to use the language experience approach and to increase the amount of writing by students, two tasks that are difficult at best without the computer. Our strategy for learning about computers and reading/writing instruction involved identifying some helpful articles for theoretical background and practical suggestions and trying out our knowledge with some learners. This article is a summary of the best of the professional reading and our experiences with the students. Our group consensus was that if you have access to a microcomputer and teach reading and/or writing, word processing is a tool that is a must. Here's why!

The articles we identified as being most helpful seemed to do one of three things. First, they helped us understand why the reading/writing approach or language experience should be part of the instructional program. Secondly, they helped us think that it could be done. Lastly, they helped us know what to do.

Newman (1984) discusses two important issues, the relationship of recent research on learning to write and the writing process to word processing and the philosophical

difference between using computers for drill and practice and using them for word processing. According to Newman, writing improves more "by experimenting with many aspects of the process at the same time" (p.495) than by mastering separate skills and blending them together. The description sounds like working from the whole to the parts and experimenting with language. She believes that word processing allows a writer to do that better. Word processing allows more rapid alteration and manipulation of the text which results in more experimentation with language while the writer sustains the mental images trying to be captured. The search/replace capability encourages synonym substitution and the immediate access to a clean copy is motivational and stimulates further language play. In general, she says that word processing has many advantages as a tool in writing instruction.

It allows writers to become more willing to take risks, to be tentative about meaning longer, to consider organization and word choices more freely than ever before. What this means is that children (and adults, too) can learn a great deal about language and the writing process each time they engage in writing. (p. 495)

Newman's second major point deals with whether we are teaching children that they are controlled by the computer or they control it. The massive amounts of drill and practice

software being used in reading and language arts classrooms convey implicitly that the computer is in charge, it tells the user what to do, it controls what is learned. Word processing can become an example of how we allow learners to exert control in using computers and in learning to write. The difference in approaches epitomizes the difference between approaches that create readers who don't comprehend and writers who can't think creatively.

Way (1970) and Hennings (1981) review the reasons for using a language experience approach (LEA) to reading/writing instruction, pointing out its advantages and describing the process. The LEA primarily consists of students writing or dictating a story in response to a teacher provided stimulus, learning to read it orally and doing follow-through activities such as skill work, illustrations, or finding related library books. Even though the hardware used by Way is outmoded, her rationale for using the LEA is as relevant as ever. She stresses the value of each reader using relevant and familiar content to acquire skills and of pupils having vocabulary and conceptual understanding internalized prior to skills lessons. She discusses the damage to readers self-concepts who struggle with materials that are too difficult and the damage from suffering through boring material, neither of which is likely with the language experience approach.

The typical classroom application of the language experience approach described by Way and Hennings simultaneously demonstrates its disadvantages. Although the approach utilizes sound aspects of writing like the

prewriting, drafting, and rewriting stages, used with individuals or with small groups it creates some practical obstacles. The teacher often records slightly different language than the students dictate because of the limitations of recording on charting paper. Recopying by the teacher or the students following revising and editing is time consuming and usually not motivating. Older children who may revise and edit without direct teacher involvement may limit their alterations, their language play, or they may avoid it altogether because of the tedium of recopying. Both authors agree that these problems are overcome by using the word processing capabilities of the microcomputer. The teacher can help students revise and edit, making changes which appear immediately on the monitor as the students observe.

Hennings, Barber (1982), and Di Giammarino (1981) all describe the LEA utilizing the computer. They emphasize that the knowledge needed to employ a computer for word processing is to be feared no more than most of us, even nontypists, fear a typewriter. Hennings discusses misconceptions about microcomputers that might prevent reading/language arts teachers from trying word processing. It does not require mathematical expertise, it does not depersonalize instruction, and it is not part of the distant future. What it does require is use of a set of simple commands that tell the computer what and when to delete, to move, to replace, to store in memory, to print, and etc. depending on the power or complexity of the program. It actually helps personalize instruction by facilitating individualization. And it can be

a part of the present reading/writing program, not a mysterious machine the math teacher only has the power to control...the force is with all of us!

Barber's and DiGiammarino's articles particularly help to foster the attitude by teachers that the word processing/LEA can actually be done by describing anecdotes and observations from actual school situations. The examples include stories from first graders and the teamwork between a principal and a fifth grade teacher. The observations made by the fifth grade teacher indicate her support for word processing in reading/language arts instruction.

Students revise their work. They correct punctuation and carefully select words. They work on sentence structure and juxtapositioning. Students learn the art of written expression without the fear of having to produce new copy every time their work is reviewed. This has especially helped students who have a difficult time manipulating a pencil. They write longer stories. They follow directions. They pay attention to detail. We've had other pleasant surprises as well: a student who had not written a line before being introduced to the text editor sat down and typed 25 lines of text... (p. 33)

Hennings, Barber, and DiGiammarino describe the same hardware needs to implement the word processing/LEA. Whether it be Apple, Radio Shack, Commodore, Texas Instrument, or another company word, the processing/LEA is possible with a

system that has a keyboard, monitor, cassette or disk drive, and a printer. Comments related to hardware expense become outdated quickly. What is accurate is that hardware has become increasingly affordable and educators enjoy very reasonable prices when buying in quantity for school systems. Issues related to software needs are treated in articles by Piper (1983) and Littlefield (1983).

Piper provides a detailed and thorough discussion of criteria to use to evaluate word processing programs. If a software purchase is to be made it would be advisable to read the entire Piper article in order to fully understand what is meant by general suitability, simplicity of functions, visual presentation of screen and letters, and previewing. One quality that is of particular concern is the focus of the article by Littlefield. Should the directions for using the program be screen-directed, visible on the monitor while typing or editing, or is it sufficient to have instructions in a manual or posted near the computer? Littlefield's interview with proponents of The Bank Street Writer (Scholastic version) and Word Star illustrates the differences in opinions. Ease of access to instructions is only one aspect of the issue. The power or complexity of the program is at stake. It is believed by some that students can easily learn to use the basic functions of the more powerful programs and will advance to the more complicated tasks when the need and ability exists. If they have begun on the simpler type program time will be lost in relearning a new program when they need more power. The interviewee who favored Word Star made practical

suggestions for using the more complex program with elementary children. Other word processing programs to review include Atari Writer (Atari, Inc.), Scribes (Tandy/Radio Shack Corp.), TI Writer (Texas Instruments), Word-Pro (Commodore Business Machines), and Apple Writer (Apple Computer, Inc.).

Once the commitment to word processing/LEA is made, the hardware and software are purchased, and plans for teaching students how to word process are being made Boudrot's (1984) "Word Processing Primer" is essential. The author has created five enjoyable reading/language arts activities to teach the fundamentals of word processing, including accessing disk or cassette files, and deleting, inserting, and replacing text. The students practice identifying homonyms, labeling parts of speech, and writing sentences and letters of correspondence while learning the word processing fundamentals. He has even included an Electronic Typewriter you can program your computer with if you do not have a commercial word processing program.

The teachers' enthusiasm generated by reading the article s was increased by attempting the word processing/LEA with students. The process was highly motivational for the students and the teachers. Many computer authorities warn about the lack of cost effectiveness in using the computer as a motivational device for reluctant learners (Geoffrion & Geoffrion, 1983), but this is a difficult argument to agree with when a discouraged, poor reader/writer beams from success at having authored and read a story and is ready to do more. Our experience confirmed the evidence from research on

cooperative learning activities. Children's dialogue revealed more play with language and creativity when working together and/or with a teacher than with working alone with the teacher.

We realized one simple but important management idea not mentioned by any of the authors read. It is natural for the teacher to sit before the keyboard, which seems always to be placed directly before the screen, to record students stories. This made it difficult for the children to follow as the story appeared on the screen and to read it back. The angle of the line of vision for the children interfered. We rearranged the hardware so that the children viewed the screen straight on and the teacher sat at an angle to the monitor.

None of the readings we could locate discussed ways to use word processing for developing good follow-up activities based on the children's stories. Whether the teacher or the student had stored the initial draft of a story, we found that the teacher could work efficiently at the computer to add comments, directions, questions, or skill activities for the students to use at another time. Students then responded on the computer storing or saving their work for the teacher to see later. It becomes possible for students to read each other's writing and add comments, etc. modeling the teacher.

When or if to teach keyboard skills is a problem that was not discussed by these authors, but is one facing every educator using a computer in any level classroom. We found it to be at the core of using the word processing/LEA beyond the initial phase when the students dictate to the teacher.

According to Kaake (1983) there is evidence that programs to teach children typing are successful and improve their reading, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and creative writing abilities. However, controversy exists among educators around several questions. How early will children's motor skills allow the introduction of typing? Is it a time waste and a difficult habit to break, as business educators state, for students to hunt and peck until later years when typing is now offered in the schools? Will learning gains make it worth the time to add typing to the elementary curriculum? We concluded from experience and common sense that keyboard skills should be introduced in the elementary grades as early as possible. Color coded keyboards might help beginning readers to learn letter identification. Our experiences with programs such as Type Attack (Sirius Software, Inc.) provided evidence that children will practice and enjoy the challenge of learning to type. We suspect that teaching typing and introducing the more powerful word processing programs will prove to be effective in the elementary grades.

The articles we found to be most useful to teachers interested in adapting the word processing/LEA emphasized improved writing skills more than reading skills. Although an arbitrary line should not be drawn between them, we hope to see more reports equally stressing students' reading improvements. We nor the authors discussed here concluded that the microcomputer and the word processing/LEA will immediately yield vast improvements in students reading/writing skills. We did conclude, as did the authors,

that good reading/writing instruction that occurs without the computer can be still better with it.

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